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Abandoned Cemeteries Resting But Forgotten

Department of Education and Culture (to July 99)

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The discovery of a single gravestone deep in someone's private woodland in Annapolis County might be startling to some, but not for Faye Charlebois of Dartmouth.

Happy to have traced her family to this particular spot, she was distressed to see the condition of the overgrown grave site of her great, great, great, great grandparents. Their gravestone lay broken and overgrown on the land which had been their 18th-century homestead.

Ms. Charlebois and her mother would like to tidy the area and repair the ancestors' 183-year-old marker, but what if the landowner said no? Who owns these ancient graves in 1998?

For heritage-minded people, abandoned and forgotten Nova Scotian grave sites and cemeteries mean important information has been lost forever. Overgrown, and sometimes crumbling, these gravestones are often the target of vandals. There are even cases of abandoned grave sites being ploughed under during re-development by unsuspecting or unscrupulous landowners.

Deborah Trask, Nova Scotia Museum, has been studying Nova Scotia's gravestones for more than two decades. A recent study identified nearly 1000 burial sites in Cumberland County alone, many of them unrecorded, on private or abandoned property. With a possible 20,000 burial sites across the province, the question of protecting these sites could be important to our province's heritage.

"In addition to the historical information cemeteries can provide, graveyards are traditionally sacred places," said Ms. Trask. "People want abandoned and neglected grave sites protected somehow for posterity."

The Nova Scotia Museum would like to find out more about Nova Scotians' interest in the identification and protection of abandoned cemeteries in the province.

Do you know of abandoned cemeteries in your community? If you have concerns about old graveyards in your area, please let us know. Write to: Deborah Trask, Museum Services, Nova Scotia Museum, 1747 Summer Street, Halifax, N.S., B3H 3A6, fax to 902-424-0560 or E-mail educnsm.traskde@gov.ns.ca.

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